

Doctorate School of Hungarian University of Fine Arts

„BAY OF LAKE BALATON WITH THE SHORES OF AKARATTYA, 1885”

The neo-Dutch loess realism of Géza Mészöly

DLA Dissertation Theses

Ötvös Zoltán

2010

Supervisor: Dr. habil, DLA Károlyi Zsigmond

The subject of my thesis

In my thesis, I give a detailed analysis of Géza Mészöly's major work, *Bay of Lake Balaton with the Shores of Akarattya* (original title: *Balaton öble az akarattyai partokkal*). My aim was to reveal the circumstances surrounding this work, and to place it within a wider context of Hungarian and European painting. I discuss Mészöly's life work, and having determined what finished and unfinished thoughts he has left behind along with his rich oeuvre, I form a concluding opinion of this work.

Introduction

I have approached Géza Mészöly's oeuvre from a yet undiscovered perspective: from the perspective of **his sources**. I analyzed the influences that have had an impact on him during his studies, I followed his works of painting, the impulses that have had an effect on him and his perspective of landscapes and nature.

I gave priority to the particular painting mentioned above, whereby the analysis began with a linguistic discussion of the picture's title. I reconstructed the object of his painting *Bay of Lake Balaton* – i.e. the view of the shore at Akarattya as it might have been in 1885, and compared Mészöly's experience of the scenery with the landscape which appears on the picture. I studied every detail of the painting; the structure of the picture: the foreground, the middle ground and the background, and all the elements one by one. The assessment of the elements was completed by a graphological study of the painting's signature.

I also considered some facts proving that the painting's scheme may be linked to topographical veduta painting. Furthermore, I placed the picture in its narrower context: among the works of 19th century landscape painters of Lake Balaton. I compared Mészöly's works with the art of Corot, whereby the specific attributes of Mészöly's paintings could be detected. To conclude my analysis, I studied all available bibliography on Mészöly in chronological order.

Conclusion nr. 1: The dimension of sources, or the Dutch basics of Mészöly's oeuvre, and other references

I discussed the intellectual climate that has formed Mészöly's perspective on life: his teachers, masters, the paintings he has or may have had encountered during his studies. The list starts with Kálmán Kallós, art teacher at the Debrecen Presbyterian College, whom we know as a ruin painter and topographical landscape painter. The works of Kallós may have become an important influence for Mészöly's later style, because he had the chance to learn the basics of topographical veduta painting based on fastidious drawing.

Between 1866 and 1869 in Pest, Mészöly regularly visited the Hungarian National Museum to paint and copy; here Bálint Kiss, and later Antal Ligeti (both gallery custodians) supported him. In the National Museum, he could sample for his copy-based studies some works of Italian, German, Flemish and Netherlandish masters, as well as the Hungarian paintings of his age. Mészöly made copies of old masters' representational paintings, as well as some pictures of his contemporaries, Markó, Telepy, Kiss, Ligeti and even Munkácsy.

Through Ligeti's concepts and his landscape painting, Mészöly incorporated the traditions and the current state of Hungarian landscape painting of his age, and among old masters' works, he encountered pictures the landscape perception of which strongly influenced his later, independent works.

Comparing Mészöly's works and the list of Ligeti's gallery, I made a record of the pictures that might have had a strong effect on Mészöly – the ones he might have used as inspiration: Jacob Grimm's landscapes *Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter*; Jan van Goyen's *A view of the Sea*; Philips Wouwerman's landscapes; Fidenza Francesco's *Winter landscape and View of the Misty Sea Shore*; and all the twelve landscapes of Canaletto.

From 1868, Mészöly studied landscape painting at the Vienna Academy, with Albert Zimmermann as his master. As an adherent of the Düsseldorf school of painting, Zimmermann followed the heroic landscape ideal characterized by a heroic, dramatic perception of nature. However, Zimmermann's teaching featured a dichotomy. On the one hand, it was built on the ideal of Carus' big calm and Koch's colourist painting based on rules of composition.

On the other hand, for his students, he listed as a task to study and copy 17th century Dutch landscapes. This way, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Mészöly encountered the following pictures: Jan van Goyen: *Blick auf Dortrecht, 1644, Flachlandschaft, 1630-1640*; Jacob Ruisdael: *Der Grosse Walde, Flusslandschaft mit Keller Eingang*; and Robert van den Hoëcke: *Ansicht von Ostende*.

The Zimmermann school's colourism, as well as studying, understanding and mastering 17th century Dutch landscape painting all contributed to the development of Mészöly's tonality. In his pictures, light comes from above, from the sky; this supplies the overall effect of the tonality. The heart and soul of Dutch landscapes (to which Mészöly's pictures are retraceable) also lies in the phenomenon of diffuse light (e.g. in van Goyen's works).

Conclusion nr. 2: Mészöly's loess realism in his landscapes and his genre painting

In 1871, Robert Russ became Mészöly's master for one year. Russ went back to the Dutch basics. In 1872, Russ and Mészöly left the Academy at the same time; Russ went to the Netherlands, while Mészöly returned to Hungary. His professional training and thorough studies made it possible for him – after time spent in Vienna, knowing past and current tendencies in painting – to give Hungarian landscape painting a new direction.

During his travels, searching for themes in the Alföld (the Great Hungarian Plain) and the Transdanubian region, he painted the wide-horizoned *Szigetvár*; then in the Alföld sand bars, the Transdanubian sand mines and the loess cliffs he discovered the Dutch sand dunes. The deheroized, earth toned landscape painting, which developed to match these motives, is what I call loess realism – whereby the term refers to the theme and the style, in the Zola sense of the word. Mészöly's loess realism may be first discovered in the 1872 *Sand Mine* (original title: *Homokbánya*). Here, he breaks away from Koch's dogmatized composition rules, and behind his restrained colourism, there is a richness of valeurs and half tones.

This kind of loess realism was also characteristic of Russ, who, after his trip to the Netherlands, settled down in Wachau, looking there for Dutch motives: windmills and wide-horizoned, wind-blown sandy beaches. Schindler, Tina Blau and Ribarz are some of his followers. Attributes of loess realism are striking in the works of Zimmermann's pupils (Schindler, Jettel, Ribarz), because as landscape painters, they chose to depict not the locally specific Alpine scenery, but the wide-horizoned, Dutch-inspired sandbanks – in small dimensions.

For a short period of time, following a stay in Munich, Mészöly's zoomed-out "regionalist" loess realism was replaced by another popular genre of the era: genre painting, more specifically: folk genre painting. Based on the subject matter, this category may be divided into two subgroups. In

one kind of his genre paintings, the everyday life of the village folk came alive, whereas the other group of his pictures depicts the barn yard and the poultry.

In 1882, beside pictures of the poultry yard, Mészöly returned to his loess realistic waterside scenery. This dualistic interest of his was featured in the two pictures exhibited in 1883 at the Salon in Paris: one was *Poultry Yard*, the other, *Bank of Lake Balaton*. Following his stay in France, having become acquainted with impressionism, he abandoned genre painting, returned to his waterside scenery, composing his genre subjects as staffage into a greater entity: the wide-horizoned landscape.

In the 1880's, he already created comprehensive works. He painted the lyrical *Iron Gate at the Danube (Vaskapu, 1883)*, and ten years later, he re-worked *Bath House at Lake Balaton (Fürdőház a Balatonon, 1885)*, and composed the bigger *Bay of Lake Balaton with the Shores of Akarattya (1885)*. Mészöly concluded his life-work with *Before Harvest (Aratás előtt)*.

After having reviewed his complete career and having studied all the available data, I formed a concluding opinion of his work: despite his short life span, Mészöly's oeuvre may be termed complete. He did not leave behind any unfinished thoughts or unanswered questions.

Conclusion nr. 3: Mészöly's synthetic loess realism depicts the recent past

My *modus operandi* of picture analysis was to study the picture and the painter together, in their unique and irreproducible unity, and thus to shed light on the relationship of artist and landscape from several perspectives. Attempting to understand the painter's intention meant interpreting the painter *from* his work of art, and interpreting the work of art itself *from* the actual scene, i.e. the shores of Akarattya.

Using contemporary sources, I reconstructed the Bay of Akarattya as it might have looked like in 1885, to be able to compare it to the painting, and even be able to establish what the artist took away from it, what he added to it – i.e. what elements Mészöly changed in his painting compared to the contemporary view of the landscape. I located the point from where he looked on the bay, and based on reconstruction photos, I pointed out that the *Bay of Lake Balaton* is a painting composed, on the basis of sketches, in the studio.

Then following the logic of building up the painting, I broke it down to planes and performed a detailed study. Examining the foreground, it turned out that the stony foreground is a scheme Mészöly often used, and one which is very much different from the loess and sand-covered watersides.

Analysing the middleground, I was concerned with figures, vegetation and the highest point of the shore. The results justified my presuppositions; my presentiments were verified: Mészöly painted landscapes of the recent past, the state of things as they barely yet existed, and not landscapes of the present. I studied the figures and their clothing from headwear to footgear, from the perspective of folklore and the history of clothing, and I concluded that when depicting the figures' clothing, Mészöly was correct and accurate – although, in his time, skirts were already a little shorter. This also supported my hypothesis that his pictures are enigmatic, and that they live in the recent past.

The study of the shore itself resulted in an important conclusion: the artist did not depict in the water those vast, dish-shaped patches of reed which grow on mounds of the characteristic slumps. He omitted these, and concentrated rather on painting the juncture of the picturesque shore

and the smooth, calm water. Throwing light on the themes of coastal vegetation and the fisherman's hut also supported my assumptions. Mészöly's attention to building up the picture covered even the smallest of details: actually, it is the unity of these details that organises the picture into one harmonious entity. Studying the chalky nakedness of the shore, it turned out that in Mészöly's time, there was already a Southern Railway train service running along the Aliga shore. This is not depicted either in the painting; instead, Mészöly shows the untouched, slumbering landscape, where the railway has not reached yet.

Discussing the railway's effect on the scenery, I argued that one of the consequences of railway building was the partial drainage of Lake Balaton – and the dropping of the water level. The surface of the lake diminished, and this remarkably contributed to the development of the later bath resorts – and to the final passing of Mészöly's world. Mészöly's enigmatic glance had the effect of transforming the landscape – actually, it represents a belated “watch-post” of a “utopia.”

Conclusion nr. 4: A grey sky

It is through the harmony of details that the picture is organised into one entity. In the birth of this harmony, the grey sky plays an important role, because it is the diffuse light from this sky which binds the motives together. The sky is an internal part of the painting; I used several perspectives in studying how it is clouded over, and what possible antecedents such a depiction might have had.

“Cloudiness” in modern painting began under Dutch influence. I modified, or rather supplemented Ruskin's statement, which argues that as opposed to antique and medieval painting, where skies are blue, sunny and bright, modern painting (which Mészöly is an active part of) seems to prefer cloudy skies. Ruskin explains this change with the gradual loss of faith. I claim that the clouds on the skies of Italian paintings have shown up there under Dutch influence, because Dutch landscape painters were well-known and acknowledged, and worked as background painters in Italian, primarily Venetian studios.

Through them, idyllic Italian skies were shaded over by towering Dutch clouds – and today, these clouds are still there; no wind could blow them away.

However, studying Mészöly's clouds in a narrower context, I connected the painting's grey sky, as well the greys of the Munich school of painting, with meteorological data. I established that the grey tones of the Munich school mostly developed because, according to local records, the average number of sunny hours is very low in Munich. (In the case of landscape painters, such facts can very much explain the way skies are depicted in the pictures.) Narrowing the context even more, I retraced the place and time this work was born: Mészöly painted this picture during the winter of 1885, after the first snowfall, in his apartment in Lánchíd street number six, looking out to the winter sky over Pest.

Conclusion nr. 5: Placing the *Bay of Lake Balaton* within the Hungarian and historic context of painting

I defined the picture scheme of the *Bay of Lake Balaton* within the conceptual frames of the *veduta* (panoramic painting). The basic concept of the *veduta* is a city spread out, seen from a side view, shown over the water on the other shore, whereby the foreground contains a few small figures.

This type of picture first appeared in Braun and Hogenberg's *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, published between 1572 and 1617. The scheme was continuously handed down for centuries, appearing in Vermeer's *View of Delft* just as in the *Bay of Lake Balaton*. This type of *veduta* still exists:

the scheme is repeated thousands of times every day, being passed down the years, when tourists create a kind of staffage of themselves, having their picture taken in front of the so-called city sights.

In the basic veduta composition, figures appear on a narrow strip of shore in the foreground, sometimes wearing national folk costumes, sometimes other locally specific clothing. Artists claimed about these figures framing the picture that they were painted on cityscapes because the Turks, whose religion prohibited them from using pictures depicting human figures, could not make use of these paintings in any way. Based on this, I claimed that the original meaning of the staffage element, which framed the picture, and which was added for reasons of defence and counter-intelligence, was steadily modified, until it became an integral part of the landscape, and even more: it gained an independent status on its own.

The Bay of Lake Balaton is indirectly linked to the tradition of topographical prints; through a picture scheme related to veduta paintings, Mészöly's aim was to depict the scenery in a wide and imposing picture – his artistic intentions correspond to the original intentions of veduta artists.

The Bay of Lake Balaton is part of the European and Hungarian veduta painting tradition, so to be able to study Mészöly in his local and contemporary context as well, I reviewed 19th century landscape painting. The first vedutas of Lake Balaton were created in the 19th century by cartographer András Petrich, who was also the first painter of Lake Balaton. In an age of idealized landscapes, his paintings started a list of topographical vedutas, which continued with Erdész, Imre Vízkelety and Miklós Szerelmey.

Beside the vedutas serving the Vienna taste, created by early wandering painters, it was Markó Károly the elder (1791-1860) who provided Hungarian landscape painting a solid base which could support the later tradition of Balaton landscapes. Although Markó did not directly paint any pictures of Balaton, he had an enormous influence on young and upcoming romantic landscape painters who adopted Lake Balaton as a theme. I count Antal Ligeti, Sándor Brodszky, Károly Telepy and József Molnár as the first generation of Markó's followers. The second generation of painters who followed in the footsteps of Markó were, in my opinion, Géza Mészöly, Gyula Aggházy, Pál Szinyei Merse, László Paál, Lajos Deák-Ébner, Gusztáv Keleti and Mihály Munkácsy. They are the generation who, after the dogmatic schemes of heroically composed, romantic landscape painting were exhausted, looked for solid ground.

Only Dutch landscape painting could provide this solid ground for Europe (for Constable, and through Barbizon, for the Hague school of painting), and for Hungarian painters, this acquired significance through the mediation of Vienna and Munich. These were the cities where the second generation of Markó's followers studied. The star pupil of this generation was Mészöly, in whose art the Balaton theme played a major part.

In Lake Balaton, Mészöly painted the invisible, the silence. This silence has since disappeared, so his pictures are the impressions of a golden age long gone. His followers continue to look for and paint this silence, but they do so in vain. Adding to the noise, they find themselves in a completely different, bustling and rumbling world very much unlike Mészöly's world.

Mészöly paid special attention to the shores of Akarattya, painting it several times. I searched, collected and listed the pictures that depict these shores: Telepy and Molnár also used this geologically unique terrain as a theme, just as Keleti and Dörre did. This location became a preferred theme around the turn of the century. Mészöly played a great part in the process, just like the many prints depicting the Bay of Akarattya featured in the relevant volume of the series *The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Writing and Picture*.